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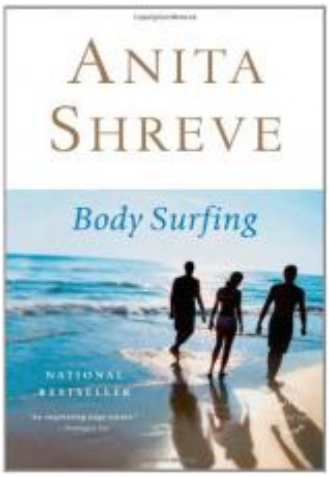
Body Surfing

by Anita Shreve



About the Book

At the age of 29, Sydney has already been once divorced and once widowed. Trying to regain her footing, she has signed on to tutor the teenage daughter of a well-to-do couple as they spend a sultry summer in their oceanfront New Hampshire cottage. But when the Edwardses' two grown sons arrive at the beach house, Sydney finds herself caught up in a destructive web of old tensions and bitter divisions.

As the brothers vie for her affections, the fragile existence Sydney has rebuilt is threatened. With the subtle wit, lyrical language, and brilliant insight into the human heart that has led her to be called 'an author at one with her métier' (*Miami Herald*), Shreve weaves a novel about marriage, family, and the supreme courage it takes to love.

Discussion Guide

1. How does the act of body surfing serve as a metaphor for the events that occur in Sydney's life?

2. Jeff tells Sydney, "We were always encouraged to believe that Julie was not an accident. . . . It's part of the family mythology" (page 41). What other stories are part of the Edwards family mythology? What kind of family does Mrs. Edwards, in particular, wish to believe she has? How does this compare to the way Sydney sees the Edwardses?

3. Discuss the relationship between Sydney and Mr. Edwards. Why does she feel such a strong connection to him? How is he different from Sydney's own father?

4. Body Surfing explores marriage and all that can surround it: engagement, divorce, widowhood, even a long-lasting marriage that may or may not be a happy one. Does the novel, ultimately, present a positive or negative take on the institution of marriage? What are your own feelings about marriage?

5. Despite the rivalry between Ben and Jeff, the brothers also share moments of closeness and collusion. Do you think there is hope for eventual reconciliation between them? How is the bond between siblings different from that between parents and children, or between spouses?

6. As a tutor in the Edwards household, Sydney set certain limits for herself, refusing to do "the dishes more than once a day. It is a private rule she never breaks, even under dire circumstances" (page 51). Why is it important to Sydney that she assert herself in this way? In what other ways does the issue of class come up in the novel? Discuss how different members of the Edwards family respond to and treat Sydney.

7. Sydney wonders, on page 246, whether any moment she had with Jeff was genuine, or whether instead he knowingly deceived her throughout their relationship. What is your opinion?

8. How did you interpret the novel's ending? Do you think Sydney will repair her connection to the Edwards family - and should she do so? Or should she seek to make a clean break from her involvement with them?

Author Bio

Anita Shreve was a high school teacher and a freelance magazine journalist before writing fiction full time. She was the author 19 novels, including THE STARS ARE FIRE as well as the international bestseller THE PILOT'S WIFE, and THE WEIGHT OF WATER, a finalist for the Orange Prize. On March 29, 2018, Shreve passed away from cancer at the age of 71.

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